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ABSTRACT

A seven-credit-hour block course, which includes Public Speaking (three institutional credits), Basic Writing (three program credits), and Reading (one program credit) was created at Murray State University to give at-risk freshmen an opportunity to take a university credit course (Public Speaking) while strengthening their reading and writing skills. Many of the students in the program have succeeded in college: by the Spring of 2001, 28% of the students who were in the program in 1998 (the first year of the program) were still in degree programs, and 39% of students in the second group of students were still in degree programs; the reading and writing instructors have seen improvement in students' skills; and students report that the block program promoted camaraderie. (RS)

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Running head: INTEGRATING SPEAKING

Integrating Speaking and Writing in the Developmental Program

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Abstract

A seven-credit-hour block course, which includes Public Speaking (three institutional credits), Basic Writing (three program credits), and Reading (one program credit) was created at Murray State University to give at-risk freshmen an opportunity to take a university credit course (Public Speaking) while strengthening their reading and writing skills.

Integrating Speaking and Writing in the Developmental Program

Peter Elbow (1985) wrote, "To exploit the speech-like qualities of writing as we teach is a way of teaching to a strength; capitalizing on the oral language skills students already possess and helping students apply those skills immediately and effortlessly in writing . . ." (p. 290). At Murray State University we use students' natural speaking abilities to provide the foundations for writing essays. Our seven-credit-hour block course teaches at-risk freshmen to write essays in their basic writing class patterned after the speeches they deliver in their public speaking class to introduce the rhetoric they will encounter in academic reading and writing.

Principles of cognition which have not been employed to their fullest are now being used to teach writing. We have affirmed, for example, that practice improves any skill whether it be swinging a golf club or choosing a good topic for a paper. Once an idea is organized as a speech, it is then organized as an essay. Secondly, we have always known that one learns more by doing than listening. Presenting a speech on the same topic as one's essay allows the writer an opportunity to experiment physically with effective communication. The speaker sees and hears responses as he or she utters the words of a speech. These spoken words can then be modified when they become written words.

The Program

Murray State's developmental students are classified as pre-baccalaureate if they possess one of the following: 1) an ACT score below eighteen, 2) a high school rank below the fiftieth percentile, or 3) a G.E.D. diploma. Students are placed in the seven-hour block program if they fall into any two of these categories. This program was

created to provide these students with minimal skills an opportunity to a take a university elective credit course, Public Speaking (three credits), along with two developmental courses, Writing Workshop (three credits) and Reading Workshop (one credit).

During the fall of 1998, eighty students were placed in the seven-hour-block curriculum. According to the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (1984), fifteen percent of these students read below a junior high reading level. Because many of these weak readers were adept speakers, we capitalized on their strengths. Using The Art of Public Speaking (2001) by Stephen Lucas and College Writing Skills with Readings (2001) by John Langan, we selected four rhetorical modes for the speeches and essays: process, classification, problem/solution, and narrative. Each semester since 1998 our students have been an assigned mode of delivery from which they pick a topic and deliver a speech in their Public Speaking class and then use the same topic and information to write an essay for their Writing Workshop class. Meanwhile, students in the Reading Workshop class are reading essays, which match the assigned rhetorical modes.

To ensure this program works to its greatest advantage, two staff members meet individually with these students when they enter Murray State University. The students' schedules are arranged so that the three classes of the block fall back to back. Each class has twenty students who move as a group from reading to speaking to writing class. The instructors confer every week and maintain close contact, an easy task since their offices are located on two floors of the same building. With an occasional exception of the evening block, full-time instructors teach the classes.

The reading class is the cement, which holds the whole process together. The reading instructor works from the Writing Workshop and Public Speaking syllabi and

textbooks. The only assignments given in the Reading Workshop class are those which help the students with their reading of model essays for English and with preparing for tests covering the chapters in Public Speaking textbook.

Links in the Chain

Linking Speaking to Writing

Using the following sequence, speech and writing teachers work in tandem to help students prepare their final products:

- First, the students discuss their ideas for topics in both classes.
- Second, they prepare outlines of their information with the help of both speech and writing instructors. The speech instructor grades the outline.
- Third, during the process of drafting their essays, students deliver their speeches and receive a grade and comments from the speech instructor.
- Fourth, they write their essays and submit them for a grade.
- Fifth, students revise their essays.

This sequence emphasizes the importance of thinking critically and imaginatively before worrying about comma usage and fragments. We encourage the students to use the structure of their in-progress essays to improve their speeches and to use examples and impromptu explanations from their speeches to enhance their essays. Feedback and revision both during and after the process help the students to build upon each performance.

Recently, we experimented with allowing the students to view their speech performances on videotape with the writing instructor. The writing instructor arranged a time to view the speech with the students individually to prompt them to observe what

could be improved in their soon-to-be written essays. The next semester, as an alternative to this time-consuming procedure, the writing instructor observed the speeches being delivered to the speech class and offered suggestions in notes later delivered to the students.

Probably the greatest benefit the block course provides for the basic writing program is the "real audience" to whom the students are expressing their ideas. As speakers, they must consider if the topic is pertinent, interesting, and easily comprehensible to other freshmen. They must use their introductions to capture their listeners' attention. They quickly learn from hearing long, rambling speeches that a lack of organization can ruin good material, and by the end of the semester, they begin to understand the power of a forceful conclusion.

Linking Reading to Writing

Each week in the Reading Workshop class the students are required to read and respond to one of the expository essays in College Writing Skills with Readings. Students come to class having answered questions at the end of each essay directed toward comprehension, structure, tone, style and critical thinking. The time in class is spent discussing the rhetorical method that is used in the assigned essay. Students work in groups, in pairs, or as a whole class to discuss how the essay's structure affects the reader. Attention is also devoted to analyzing unfamiliar vocabulary and figurative language or annotating and analyzing important passages.

Once a month the students hand in journal entries created from summaries or outlines of the assigned readings. In addition to summaries, the students also include responses to the authors' messages. For example, after reading an essay on psychological

defense mechanisms, they choose a defense mechanism, redefine it in their own words, and describe a particular time they used it. Both the writing instructor and the reading instructor respond to the journal writing. Thus, by exposing the students to models of good writing, we strengthen their reading comprehension as well as their written expression.

Linking Reading to Speaking

The reading course is also a support class for the speech course. Since the reading class meets twice a week (one credit), the second session provides assistance with mastery of the speech textbook. The reading instructor models previewing, memory techniques, and test-taking techniques to provide students with a variety of active strategies for preparing for their three speech examinations. Two class periods before each exam, students predict test questions and use their study materials to find the answers in their text.

Linking Speaking to Reading to Writing

The reading, writing, and speech instructors work as a team to facilitate preparation for individual speeches. For example, when the students begin in the writing class to create their persuasive assignment, the reading instructor joins the class and helps the students form a thesis statement. As the students finish composing, the reading instructor compiles a list of these statements, makes copies, and sends them to the speech instructor for final approval. In speech class, the students distribute the list and conduct an audience analysis with fellow students providing responses to their theses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The students take the result back to the writing class and the reading instructor joins the class to briefly introduce PowerPoint

(Microsoft, 1997), and to assist students with producing a bar graph of their results. The results of the survey determine whether students have a controversial topic or not. Once an appropriate topic has been determined, the speech instructor accompanies the students to the library to search for outside sources. The next week, the writing instructor continues the search using the classroom computer lab. The final product is a persuasive essay and speech using a problem/solution model. In completing this assignment, the students have benefited from the time and effort of a team of instructors and several overlapping class periods.

Conclusions

At each step of the process of creating essays and speeches, our students grapple with openings and closings, with providing good evidence, with clarity of expression, and with organization. We do not claim to have produced miracles, but many of our high-risk students do succeed in college. We have carefully tracked the progress of the students who began the program in 1998. By the spring of 2001, twenty-four of the eighty-five students in our first group (28%) remain in degree programs at Murray State University. The mean of the grade point averages of this group is 2.14 (four point scale). Thirty-nine percent of the students in our second fall group (1999) are still attending the university.

The writing instructor has seen students who are not able to write paragraphs at the beginning of the semester quickly learn to write whole essays. The reading instructor has seen a steady growth in our ability to impact students' low reading scores. Of the 1998 group, fifty-four percent increased their reading comprehension score on the

Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test. Of last semester's group of students (2000), sixty-seven percent increased their reading comprehension score.

In addition, our students have developed friendships within the classroom, which is unlikely to have occurred in three unrelated classes. The have met with the same group of students for seven hours a week in three fast-paced classes. On the fall 2000 student survey, all the students agreed that the block classes promoted camaraderie. The proof of their cohesiveness is observed when we see them search for classes together the next semester. As Vincent Tinto (1993) has noted, a sense of belonging has a direct bearing on college success. The students of the block program find a built-in support group for their next semester at the university.

Besides the friends they make, our students benefit from not one instructor but three working to develop a consolidated program which connects their speaking to their writing to their reading. Our students, in essence, have received the bricks and mortar of a solid foundation for future college work.

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